

INNOVATIONS IN KATHAKALI

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Are innovations in Kathakali necessary? What suggestions are possible? To what extent are they feasible? These questions are of considerable significance and demand specific answers in view of the spate of arguments and counter-arguments current at present. There has been some writing too, though sporadic, on Kathakali reform. It would indeed be worthwhile for organisations for the promotion of Kathakali to gather ideas of reform from authoritative sources and implement those that are practical. But such an effort has been lacking. It is therefore left to individuals to offer their own suggestions, insufficient though these may be.

Arguments are of varying degrees of validity. Some die-hards bred in the traditions of narrow-minded orthodoxy assert vociferously that all that is grand and beautiful in Kathakali is already there; to them the mere thought of innovation is blasphemy. They conveniently ignore the changes introduced from time to time by great reformers. The choice of themes from the Mahabharata by Kottayathu Thampuran, the highly individualistic technique of Unnayi Warriar, original ideas given practical shape by Kalladikode Nambudiri, Kaplingad Nambudiri and Vettath Thampuran, are only a few of the welcome deviations in the span of three centuries and more which cumulatively have made Kathakali what it is today. In the historical perspective, therefore, the assertion of some conservatives that the mere introduction of an innovation in Kathakali is sacrilegious does not stand the test of scrutiny. At the other extreme is the uninformed contention of some modernists that unless Kathakali adapts itself to the changing needs of society and keeps pace with the rapid transformations of the modern work-a-day world, it is for all practical purposes a dead art

and should be given a burial. Those who hold this view are for the most part ignorant of the traditions and conventions of Kathakali and incapable of experiencing the indescribable artistic enjoyment it affords. Between these two extremes are many opinions, some of which are entitled to earnest consideration. The right course appears to be to see whether a few innovations could not be introduced to meet the demands of modern society, and at the same time to take every care to preserve undiminished the individuality and grandeur of the dance-drama. I believe that some innovations of this kind are both necessary and feasible.

Before I go into details, let me make it clear that for the present purpose I am leaving the existing masterpieces alone, that I confine myself strictly to Kathakalis of the future. We have concerned ourselves much with the past of Indian classical arts without reference to their present and future. Occasionally we might permit ourselves the luxury of looking into the future with, of course, reference to the present and past.

One of the most important changes which I envisage relates to the duration of a Kathakali performance. Traditional Kathakalis, some of which are the immortal creations of great minds, were originally intended for continuous performance from dusk to dawn. They were written in spacious times when people could sit up nights watching them. But times are different now, and people just cannot afford this luxury. The necessity for short duration has therefore to be given high priority. Future Kathakali writers should, of necessity, keep this paramount factor in view. A whole Kathakali for a duration of, say, two-and-a-half or three hours is a desideratum.

Now to the selection of themes. As a rule Kathakali dramatises Puranic stories. But there have been a few minor exceptions to the rule. Experimentations in this regard were attempted decades ago. There is an historical Kathakali "Martandavarmavijayam", the hero being Martanda Varma, founder of modern Travancore. Kattakkayam Cherian Mappila wrote "Olivervijayam" based on episodes from a French epic. A recent one is "Davidvijayam", Sardar K. M. Panikkar's adaptation of the Biblical story of David and Goliath. To many admirers of Kathakali these are more experiments than successes. There is a strong body of opinion, and with considerable justification, that Kathakali should not be made to descend from its unearthly eminence and gather to itself some of the dust and dirt of modern life. Driven to necessity, the versatility inherent in Kathakali may be able

to devise *hastamudras* for smoking a cigarette, driving a scooter, speaking over the telephone, and many other acts of modern man. But should this necessity arise at all? Will it not be best to leave Kathakali to deal with Puranic themes? One of the glories of this art is its tremendous power to bring to us a world peopled by gods and goddesses and innumerable supernatural and preternatural beings, the dazzling world of Hindu mythology. Shorn of this splendid achievement, the art will undoubtedly stagnate and may even perish.

It has to be stated that while preserving this basic characteristic it is yet possible for Kathakali to explore new fields of creative activity. For we have to remember that Hindu mythology has not been altogether exhausted in Kathakali. In the two *itihasas*, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, and the many Puranas, there still remains a vast body of material clamouring to be exploited by new writers. Shall they not do so to our advantage? Let the new Kathakalis bring to the stage lesser known, and not necessarily second-rate, characters and make them enact in song and dance the drama of their lives for us to see and enjoy them.

Musically, too, Kathakali bristles with possibilities for experimentation and original work. Kathakali music, it may be pointed out, has come in for much criticism on the part of purists. Elsewhere I have had occasion to examine this question in detail¹. However, one or two points need reiteration here. One occasionally hears unnecessary and somewhat jarring variations in the rendering of the same songs by different singers, songs sung in *ragas* different from those in which they were originally composed, and without proper adhesion to the correct *swaras* of the *ragas* or even the *sruti*. If Kathakali music is to be lifted to the level of the other facets of the dance-drama—and it certainly should be—authentic notations of the songs must be prepared by proper persons and trained singers must be made to adhere strictly to them. Improved music will by itself have the effect of imparting additional beauty to the whole art.

In the past Kathakalis have been written by some who have had no knowledge of the theory or training in the practice of music. This has undoubtedly been a defect as Kathakali *padas* are songs set in *ragas* and *talas* and not written in any of the metres current in the language of Kerala. In fact this is a fundamental difference between the form of Kathakali songs and the rest of Malayalam poetry. Authors

¹“Koralasangeetham”: Part: II: Kathakali ; Music

of Kathakali, hereafter at least, should be persons with a basic knowledge of music in addition to their literary and other accomplishments. They must themselves furnish the outline of the musical form of their compositions. Embellishments of course can be provided, if necessary, by a professionally well-equipped musician working directly under the supervision and guidance of the writer.

There is another field which affords considerable scope for innovations of a healthy and rewarding nature in Kathakali music. The atmosphere of Kathakali vocal music is brought about in part by what are popularly known as Kerala *ragas* viz. *khandram*, *kanak-kurinji*, *poranira*, *indalam*, *indisa* and others, and in part by some prominent *ragas* which have honoured places in Karnatak concerts like *sankarabharanam*, *todi*, *bhairavi*, *kalyani*, *mukhari*, *kamboji* and so on. Broadly, speaking, however, the *ragas* used in Kathakali have generally followed the pattern set by convention and are therefore somewhat limited in number. Worthwhile attempts have not been made to compose Kathakali songs in other *ragas* which also have considerable appeal to listeners of classical music concerts. I for one do not remember having seen Kathakali songs composed in *hindolam*, *reetigaulam*, *manirangu*, *kharaharapriya*, *harikamboji* among others. If Kathakali songs of the future are also composed in some popular pleasing *ragas* unwittingly kept out so far, in addition to some generally used hitherto, there is no doubt that an element of variety and freshness will be imparted and thereby the musical content enriched to a great degree.

And we have to consider the use of additional *talas* too. The main *talas* in Kathakali are *chempada*, *adantha*, *panchari* and *champa* which have their counterparts in Karnatak music, though they are known by different names. A welcome innovation would be to use some other *talas* alongside.

Cutting down the length of Kathakali *padams* is a must in the dance-dramas of tomorrow. Some Kathakalis of olden days contain very long *padams* with a number of *charanams*, ideas being elaborated at great length with minute attention to details. Unnayi Warriar's celebrated classic "Nalacharitham" is one of the most notable examples. The great masters had their own justification for such elaboration and it is not up to us to criticise them from the modern viewpoint. But in Kathakalis to be written undue length of songs would be out of place and tend to bore the audience. Therefore authors must henceforward take care to make their *padams* short, and limit them to, say, eight lines

each. They should eliminate all padding, preserve economy of words and bring out ideas in concentrated form. The attempt should be to provide effect and beauty in as short a time as possible.

Reduction in the length of *padams* will help to contribute to greater artistic enjoyment in another way. In any drama one has necessarily to reckon with the reaction of the character to whom another character is speaking. In traditional Kathakalis one often notes the embarrassment of an actor in not being able to show relevant reaction to the long-winded address the other is making to him. Attempts of course are being made at present to devise ways and means of mitigating this embarrassment to some extent. One of the easiest steps is to write short *padams* which will also be of much help in maintaining the element of drama to a notable degree. Dialogue in songs of two lines each should also be possible occasionally. Crisp, short dialogue will project more conspicuously and effectively the inherent operatic nature of Kathakali songs.

A very important need in the Kathakalis of the future is to limit the number of characters in the dance-drama. In some traditional Kathakalis one often finds characters whose presence is not very vital to the development of the drama or the progress and movement of the story. One reason may have been to meet the exacting demands of a performance lasting through a full night; another, to introduce variety in make-up and costumes with a view to holding the interest of the audience. But we can no more afford superfluous characters for the sake of variety alone. Meticulous attention must be paid to the principle of relevance, and no character for whose appearance and action there is no justifiable motivation should be made to step onto the Kathakali stage. The developments taking place in modern drama have to be kept in view to a certain extent in Kathakali too. Possessing as it does the unique advantage of being able to bring before our eyes everything in heaven, earth and hell through *hastamudras* and *abhihaya*, Kathakali is in a position to easily dispense with the presence of unwanted characters on the stage. The main types like the *pacha*, the *kathi*, the *thadi*, the *minukku* etc. can by themselves hold the attention of the audience and do not require the assistance of the minor ones. A compact, well-knit, streamlined dance-drama with four or five characters is certainly within the bounds of possibility.

To sum up: let us have short Kathakalis of two-and-a-half or three hours duration, based on lesser known but intensely dramatic Puranic themes, singers adhering to authentic notations, some songs set in

ragas and *talas* not used in Kathakalis so far, containing short *padams* and as few characters as possible.

“Karnasapatham” by the present writer, a production of which was staged recently by the International Centre for Kathakali, New Delhi, is an attempt to translate these suggestions into practice. Other innovations are also possible. But in introducing them one has to proceed with great caution and reverence. For Kathakali is a great glory and nothing should be done to deface it. Innovations and experiments for their own sake would be tantamount to sacrilege. The question we have to consider is whether it is possible to make certain changes and abridgements to suit modern conditions, and at the same time preserve all the basic characteristics in their original purity. The answer is an emphatic affirmative.

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